

Becoming a Subject Through the Body

A Research Presentation

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(July 2025)

This thesis, *Becoming a Subject Through the Body*, outlines the core directions of a research project that investigates the practice of Ashtanga yoga through the lens of a critical socio-anthropological perspective. Grounded in an autoethnographic approach, it interrogates the body as both a site of subjectivation and a potential space of resistance. Ashtanga yoga is approached here as a practice of the self, situated at the intersection of embodied attention, agency, and critical subjectivation.

This work unfolds through four structuring concepts: body, attention, agency, and subjectivation, that I sought not only to define but to interweave, so that each could enrich the others and help articulate the complex dynamics at play in contemporary self-practices.

This research began with a simple yet disarming question: how can one live differently in a world saturated with norms, crises, and injunctions to perform? How might one reclaim a sense of agency from within, without fantasizing an outside to capitalism, but instead by exploring its margins, its interstices, the discreet practices that loosen its grip?

This work belongs to that ambiguous space: at the crossroads of the political, the ethical, and the sensible.

The origins of this project lie in a broader intellectual trajectory, shaped by previous work on the politics of attention, and by philosophical investigations into the body. In particular, the Spinoza-Deleuze provocation : "no one knows what a body can do", proved foundational. Not because it provides an answer, but because it invites a posture of attentiveness: to what the body does, transforms, and engages, when it is taken up in a demanding, repetitive practice such as Ashtanga yoga.

This question of the practice of the self reactivates my earlier philosophical interrogations, especially the ambivalent relation between alienation and subjectivation in self-practices, grounded in a close reading of Foucault's late work. This thesis takes up those questions anew, through the lens of embodied fieldwork, attempting to think what a body *does*, *transforms*, and *engages* when it is caught in an intense, repetitive discipline such as Ashtanga yoga.

Methodology and Fieldwork

The project truly took shape in India, where I first arrived without a clearly defined research agenda—guided instead by encounters, contingencies, and the openness of a field still to be discovered. It was in Mysore that I met the practice of Ashtanga yoga: intense, codified, and demanding.

From the outset, it confronted me with a paradox. On one hand, it seemed to embody a near-ascetic discipline, verging on a technique of bodily normalization. On the other, it opened up a space of listening, transformation, and reconfiguration of the relation to oneself—a possible exercise of freedom.

This ambivalence became the point of departure for my inquiry, grounded in an autoethnographic posture where my own body became, simultaneously, the terrain, the tool, and the object of research. Though delicate to maintain within socio-anthropological standards, this position proved essential for grasping the stakes of a practice that unfolds outside of language—through sensation, gesture, rhythm, and attention.

Pattabhi Jois's oft-cited phrase : "99% practice, 1% theory" captures this dimension. The heart of the inquiry lies in the practice itself.

The research rests on a central hypothesis: Ashtanga yoga, as a corporeal and attentional practice, occupies a liminal space: between its potential co-option by the wellness industry and its capacity to serve as a site for critical subjectivation. It can reinforce logics of performance and optimization; but it can also reorganize the relation to oneself and the world, through breath, rhythm, presence, and an ethics of embodiment.

I built my theoretical framework around three main axes: a critique of contemporary capitalism and its recuperation of critical practices (drawing on Adorno, Boltanski & Chiapello, and Eva Illouz); a reading of Foucault's work on technologies of the self, with a focus on the process of subjectivation as transformation rather than rupture; and a theorization of attention as a political stake, both a contested resource and a mode of critical presence in the world.

Methodologically, my autoethnographic approach was rooted in a daily Ashtanga practice. My body became an observatory, allowing me to track the subtle effects of repetition and discipline: micro-transformations of body and mind, attentional shifts and breakdowns, experiences of pain, and quiet adjustments of gesture, posture, and intention. I documented this through field notebooks, detailed descriptions of sensations, and a doubled mode of attentiveness—hovering between immersion and analysis.

Insights from the Field

Before concluding, I would like to reflect on what I see as the key contributions of this research, both theoretically and methodologically.

First, this thesis offers a reconceptualization of subjectivation, not as an abstract or discursive process, but as a gradual, situated, and embodied transformation. It unfolds through the thickness of repetition, of breath, of attention, of rhythm. Through the daily practice of Ashtanga yoga, I have sought to show how the body can simultaneously be a site of subjection to norms and a space of recomposition of the self. This tension is not to be resolved, but to be continuously reconfigured.

Central to this is the notion of *embodied attention*, which I propose as a key concept. I define it as a situated, sensory, and ethical mode of attention, structured by the practice itself, rather than as a cognitive resource or disembodied vigilance. This form of attention is not passive nor automatic: it is cultivated, disrupted, reengaged through breath, postural adjustments, and attunement to bodily limits. It becomes a lever for subjectivation, countering the dominant logics of distraction and acceleration.

A second contribution lies in proposing a critical yet nuanced reading of wellness capitalism. Far from simply denouncing it, I attempt to show how practices like yoga, while embedded in neoliberal logics, can also be singularly inhabited by practitioners. In this way, they may open up spaces of discreet resistance, of sensitive reappropriation, and of experimentation with alternative ways of living.

Methodologically, this thesis embraces an embodied form of autoethnography, rigorously documented and grounded in lived experience. By treating the body not merely as an object of analysis, but as a site of knowledge production, I aim to contribute to a recognition of forms of intelligibility that emerge from sensory experience, while remaining attentive to the social, political, and subjective dynamics at play.

Finally, this research contributes to contemporary discussions on practices of the self through an ethics of limits. By exploring zones of stagnation, pain, and renunciation, I seek to affirm a form of subjectivation that does not rely on heroic transcendence, but on a careful attention to thresholds, to vulnerability, to slowness. In contrast with the dominant logics of speed and performance, what emerges is a patient, rhythmic, and situated subjectivity: one that is crafted in the margins, in the breath, in the body.

This approach also invites us to consider often-overlooked dimensions of bodily practices: the ethical role of pain, the quiet fidelities built through repetition, the small but effective forms of resistance, the singular ways of responding to authority, and the nonlinear temporalities that defy

measurement. In this way, I propose an anthropology of micro-gestures, of those moments in the folds of everyday life where new relations to self and world can emerge.

Ultimately, it is this attentional engagement, a willingness to remain present to oneself, that may offer a form of resistance from within. Beyond the case of Ashtanga yoga, this work aspires to contribute to a broader reflection on attention and subjectivation in a world saturated with images, narratives, and injunctions to visibility. It invites us to take seriously the political force of discreet gestures, of silent commitments, of bodily fidelities that escape dominant norms.

Reflections and Perspectives

This research is grounded in an intimate immersion within a bodily practice, one that demanded significant effort and commitment, and in a first-person inquiry where my own body served as the field of investigation. If this approach enables the production of situated and sensitive forms of intelligibility, it is not without limitations: it entails a constant tension between experience and analysis, and it requires ongoing reflexivity to avoid conflating singular lived experience with generalizable knowledge.

Yet it seems to me that it is precisely within this tension, between personal involvement and theoretical ambition, that an embodied form of knowledge can emerge, opening up a fertile critical space from which to reengage the margins as generative zones of freedom.

This thesis opens several avenues for further inquiry. It could be extended through comparative studies with other bodily or spiritual practices, or by incorporating a broader diversity of practitioners' experiences. It would also be fruitful to delve more deeply into the historical, spiritual, and narrative dimensions of yoga and the forms of subjectivity it produces. More broadly, the project calls for renewed attention to the body's role in processes of subjectivation.

Ultimately, this work seeks to question the contemporary conditions under which transformation becomes possible. It explores how bodily practices can serve as tools for critical reappropriation of the self, and how even the smallest gestures may contribute to an ethics and politics of everyday life. It invites us to revisit our modes of being-in-the-world, and to cultivate engaged forms of attention.

This situated, embodied, and attentional critique takes seriously what discreet gestures, bodily commitments, and fragile fidelities can still do in a world saturated with images, discourses, and normative injunctions. Rather than seeking to resolve or escape ambivalence, it proposes another mode of engagement: one that listens to what still might unfold in the quiet space of a breath or a glance.

This thesis is, above all, an attempt to write experience as knowledge, and to claim the body as a site of thought. It defends the possibility of a critical subjectivation rooted in bodily practice, rehabilitates forms of embodied knowledge, and invites us to rethink what a body can do when it becomes engaged in an everyday ethics of attention.